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Douglas, Mary

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An Aesthetic View of the Relation between Culture and Nature

Mary Douglas †

Introduction

Why is it so difficult to mobilize a strong, world-wide movement to protect the environment against global warming? The President of the United Nations has recently commented on the lack of leadership for this cause. The general idea is that a great leader would inspire world-wide commitment. The first point to be made here concerns the obvious obstacles that would beset such a leader. If, in this case, leadership is impossible, we should give up the quest. Perhaps we could achieve commitment without a leader.

The second point is that a community united by strong solidarity generally creates and confers power. It works by spontaneous sanctions on non-conformers, who risk being expelled if they continue to defy custom. It endows a leader with power when the members want the benefits of coordination. We should remember that the combination of power and solidarity can be very dangerous, either by violently suppressing its minorities or by waging war on external enemies.

It remains to ask whether solidarity is possible without endowing authority and power? Here I will cite the rare case of a people who have achieved strong solidarity without conceding power to anyone. They do it by coercing each other in the name of environmental risks. This is what our environmental activists try to do, but for us it doesn't work. On these topics I will present an anthropologist's view.

Bias

One of the reasons for lack of effective enthusiasm for saving the environment is a world-wide awareness of bias. World opinion is still deeply divided about human responsibility for the present signs of global warming, and it is further divided quite passionately as to whether drastic action should be taken at once to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide gases, or whether some by self-correcting process the

problem will just go away, or whether it is already too late to make any difference to our fate. There are also questions about who should bear the brunt of reform.

Suspicion of bias gives reasons for rejecting a message. I am far from saying that the official communications are biased. Be they ever so clear and consistent, public confidence in the validity of what is being communicated is weak. Here I am concerned with bias in the negative sense, when the adjective ›biased‹ de-legitimizes an opinion. When there is scope for disagreement, bias on each side of an issue weakens support for both. One kind of bias arises from moral convictions; another results from a particular ›perspective‹. The moral bias affects the idea of what it is to be human, what condition of life is right for human persons to live in, how humans should treat one another. This gives rise to political bias, about justice and public policy. The other kind of bias is embedded in a particular cultural perspective. Because of your position you see a blue cup, but if the light changes to yellow, you will see a green cup. By itself, the cup looks big, among other really big cups it looks small. A shift of perspective does not necessarily involve change of moral or political bias. Yet, if we change the kind of company we keep our moral and political biases will come under pressure to conform to the new position. Then we are very likely to adopt the new cultural perspective. Bias is usually blatantly visible to others, but invisible to its bearers. Biased persons cannot see any alternative to the way they judge the fundamental realities of their lives. The perspective provides taken-for-granted categories. Any community strives for a consensus on certain facts and principles so as to establish an agreed basis for everyday interaction. Consequently it builds up for its members the cultural bias that is a shared perspective. For example, gender, and generation differences usually fall into one of these not-to-be-questioned categories, also the difference between humankind and animal kinds. In a small community anyone who tries to challenge these certainties will be cold-shouldered at least, expelled at worst. Cultural theory treats this constructed certainty as the ›rationality‹ which upholds a particular kind of social organisation.¹ If conflicting certainties are warning us to withhold consent to what we are being told about the environment, we must ask how bias can be controlled. The answer will have something to do with self-interest in the short term.

Anthropologists Must Know Their Own Bias

Anthropology is a discipline that forces its practitioners to think about bias. The most difficult thing we ever have to master is awareness of our own perspective and

¹ For multiple rationalities and ›contradictory certainties‹, see Ellis/Thompson/Wildavsky (1990).

our own moral bias. Please excuse my reminiscences. In 1946 I went to Oxford as a graduate student of Social Anthropology. It was Evans-Pritchard's first year as Professor. In my first week I eagerly attended a lecture he gave introducing a course on 'Fieldwork Methods'. I was expecting advice for fieldworkers, such as, 'How to take notes', or 'What boots to wear', 'What things should never be done?' So I was surprised that the lecture was about the history of ideas, and the origins of anthropology. It focused on Robertson-Smith, the great Victorian scholar who had held the Free Church Chair of Hebrew at Aberdeen in 1870.

In Robertson-Smith's day the big questions about mankind were about the origins of civilization: Where did it start? Ethnologists and archaeologists had been developing methods to show where on the map of the world a particular technique, or a particular idea or institution had started, and how it diffused from there. Another approach, which was Robertson-Smith's chosen path, was a fashionably Darwinian theory of social and moral evolution. Primitive people used primitive tools, and it followed that their religion was primitive, and their moral codes too. It would take thousands of years of social evolution for a 'primitive society' to catch up with the intellectual and moral superiority of the west. Robertson-Smith's advanced views on evolution caused him to be forced out of his Chair in Aberdeen. However, by the time I got to study social anthropology the 'Ethnological' approach was no longer in fashion.

After Evans-Pritchard had shot down the whole project of tracing moral and intellectual evolution, he concluded with a few words on its contemporary successor, 'Functionalism'. Recommending it as the best we could do at present, he took care to warn us that Functionalism would one day be shot down in its turn (and so it has happened). After the lecture I asked the great man rather petulantly, 'What has all this got to do with fieldwork?' He answered: 'Wait and see.'

Eventually, I found that fieldwork puts the personal baggage of basic assumptions and prejudice under constant challenge (Shweder 1991). I came to appreciate this first lecture as an indispensable lesson on academic bias. A strong theory only allows certain kinds of questions, and favours only specified methods of solving them. Each dominant theory blocks out other kinds of questions. We were being taught that bias is inevitable. For controlling it the only recourse for the anthropologist is to study bias comparatively, and specially the current theoretical bias, explore and exploit it to the full, critically and creatively. Anthropology students must above all examine their own bias, make it explicit and visible. This is the first step to objectivity.

Problems with Objectivity

I am not personally convinced that we really value objectivity in everyday matters. I notice that when I seek to know more about some controversial topic I tend to consult authorities whose perspective is the same as my own. Other people seem to do the same. Simultaneously, I can feel indignant when important medical advice turns out to have been biased by the interests of the pharmaceutical industry. Where the natural environment is concerned we do look for objectivity. Some colleagues seem to have developed specialized skills for detecting bias in public pronouncements. It is even possible for them to suspect that a geologist's or an oceanographer's argument about global warming might be coloured by his political or religious convictions. Environmental discourse, however precisely worded by the scientists themselves, reeks of bias when it is transferred from a professional statement to the general media. Why is this?

The answer is that information about the dangers to the environment (effects of carbon dioxide pollution for example) is especially good for pointing the finger of blame. There is no disguising the fact that the major offenders are the wealthy nations of the western world. Their people own more cars, burn more fuel, travel more by air, than the people living in poor countries. In consequence the international discourse on global climate change is morally and politically loaded from the start. Despoiling the environment is becoming one of the regular political accusations even in internal party politics. The moral load becomes a political load, which makes it a sensitive subject. Politicians might be wise to avoid it. This suggests another reason why no big leaders are emerging to muster our active support for the cause of the environment. We cherish our moral opinions and we don't like being preached at.

Perspective Bias

A standardised idea of Nature is a crucial part of any society's way of functioning. How can we discuss Society and Nature when our view of Nature is formed for us by our Society? At the same period, as a student of Social Anthropology, I learnt something about perspective bias.

One day a distinguished entomologist was invited to lecture on insect society as part of a course on methodology. He talked for a bit, then after setting up a maze on the seminar table, he opened a box of ants at one end, putting at the other end some incentive for them to find their way out of the maze. We students identified with the little creatures as they puzzled their way through various dead-end paths

and back again, gradually learning by their mistakes, eventually mastering the pattern and arriving triumphantly at the exit, and reward. Some ants were quicker than others, a few got stuck, going round and round pathetically, making the same mistakes over and over again. The maze was only too like the University as we experienced it.

Eventually it was time to bring the exercise to an end. The demonstrator got ready to go. First he gathered up the successful ants and returned them to their box. Then he began to fold up his maze., but the failed ants were still wandering disconsolately around the table. He was in a hurry. We held our breath in suspense, wondering what he would do about them. It would obviously be too difficult to pick them up one by one, and improper to release them into the seminar room by shaking out the cloth.

No problem! He simply squashed the deviants with his thumb, saying dismissively, ›It doesn't matter. They are the stupid ones.

We were shocked. Formerly, we would have shared the taken-for-granted perspective that insects are a nuisance, just pests. In that perspective human needs have strict priority. But now we had made a change of perspective. We had personally identified with the insects. We were dismayed to discover that there is a difference between ›Us, (the human subjects of study), and ›Them« (the non-human subjects). If a tiger escapes or a poisonous snake, it will be killed without compunction, likewise insects. Ants on the loose get no respect.

This lesson bodes ill for hopes of possible harmony between society and nature. Admittedly, not all sectors of our society assume the priority of human values over animals. In England we are drawn into disputes about animal rights. Anger against blood sports has increased. Fish are now being counted as animals and fishing as a blood sport.. In August this year a gang of 35 masked animal-rights activists were harrying a grouse shooting party in Lancashire. Turned away by the police, the frustrated attackers came upon a party of anglers. They assaulted them with stones and sticks, threatened to throw them into the river, and started to break their rods. (*Daily Telegraph*, 19/8/2006). The police in the Midlands are warning fishers that they are in increasing danger.

Let the case illustrate the two main kinds of bias. Members of a group which maintains the rights of humans to make sport with animal lives have probably been hunting and fishing for generations without ever considering the fish's point of view. They would be acting on their taken-for-granted perspective. On the other side, People who fight for the right of animals to be safe from sportsmen are surely fired by moral principles.

Back to Objectivity

If a person were to go through life without any moral convictions the life would be of no account, hardly human. Bias is not wrong, it is normal and right. Yet we need to control it because physical scientists have identified the perils that menace our environment. They have targeted our society of advanced industrial capitalism as responsible for the danger facing our planet. I am not wishing in any way to contradict this. We still have good reasons for wanting to be objective about the environment.

Scientific methods of gaining objectivity are hard to apply to moral and cultural questions. Physics and Chemistry use controlled experiment but moral principles forbid us to experiment on human beings. Biologists achieve objectivity by detailed measurement on planned comparisons. But there again, grave difficulty attends the measuring, even the classifying, of human values. For comparing values objectivity is notoriously elusive. We should consider whether the quest for objectivity about the environment is just as unrealistic as the wish for a world leader or for world-wide solidarity.

A philosopher friend, S. Guttenplan, reminds me that a universalistic viewpoint could claim to be objective in the usual sense of the word. That would be a view that has no sectoral interests; it only seeks to know what is good or bad for all mankind, or the planet. It is a very lofty position. We could try to take it if we are not put off by Thomas Nagel's idea that a view unaffected by any particular stand point would be a ›View from Nowhere‹ (Nagel 1989), which doesn't sound very helpful. Let us leave this issue on one side, it only arises because physical science offers prestigious models of objective reasoning and provides the grand theoretical background of our thinking.

Characteristically, science proceeds by dividing, defining, and polarising. Following faithfully in its footsteps we find ourselves pitting Society against Nature, two separate concepts on which we start to work in the scientific style of dividing and defining. This leads us to polarize the two formidable agencies, Society and Nature, a process which is bound to expose dormant layers of bias: we take sides; we identify enemies, we preach sermons against them – and that is about all we can do.

Perspective on Nature

In a very profound sense we are truly biased about Nature, and we can't help it. We never see Nature except through a socially fabricated lens. Society makes the bias by

agreeing on certain fixed perspectives. One of the real problems in thinking on this subject, even in using the word ›nature‹, is that we have long indulged a habit of using ›the natural‹ as a synonym for ›the good‹. Thus the idea of ›nature‹ is made into a weapon to enforce conformity. In this usage conformity to a cultural ideal is approved as ›natural behaviour‹, while deviance is judged to be ›contrary to nature‹, or ›unnatural‹, and therefore disapproved.

There is still a tendency to use the idea of natural and unnatural to indicate moral status. Incest bears the stigma of being contrary to nature. The history of gender provides many examples. We are familiar with persecution of homosexuality. Transsexuals pose problems for the legal process when the rights of men and women are legally defined. A boy registered at birth in 1935 as George Jamieson, grew up with striking girlish prettiness. He was so much bullied for his feminine looks that he miserably thought he was a girl in a boy's body. In 1960 he underwent the operation that equipped him with a woman's body. He became a truly glamorous female, re-naming herself April Ashley. In 1970 she married, but later in Court her marriage was declared null because the judge ruled that she never could have been legally married. He judged that she had always been a man; no amount of surgeon's skill could alter that natural fact. (In the course of time the bias against transsexuals has softened, and the law has been changed.) Her life-story is a recent example of the bias against sexual deviance justified in the name of Nature.

When the idea of Nature is constructed as a model for good human appearance and good human behaviour, the word is being used as a policing strategy. The forensic myth is transparently false. Did any one really think that animals in the natural state would not ›commit‹ incest? Or ›sodomy‹? The University of Oslo has just opened an exhibition of gay animals. ›Homosexuality has been recorded in some 1.500 species so far, and been well-documented in about a third of these cases. It has been known since the time of Aristotle, who thought he witnessed two male hyenas having sex with one another‹. Has the diversity of Nature been hidden all this while by an age-long conspiracy of decency?

Sermonising and Casting Blame

The fact that the word ›nature‹ carries a moral freight makes it especially susceptible to bias. Wise politicians have learnt to be wary of moralizing. In modern industrial society we are hardened to rebuke. Indeed, scolding achieves very little. When Tawney's *Acquisitive Society* exposed our generally selfish and unchristian chasing after goods of all kinds, I doubt whether he got the readers to change their ways. Never a year now passes without new books or articles upbraiding the ›consumer

society», and new appeals to reform. We are tired of it; we have heard it so often. The reproaches run off, like water off a duck's back. The moral high ground is a shaky place for a would-be leader to be, if he is going to take the planet out of danger. A problem for him: if he bores us by sermonizing, how is he going to attract our attention?

Time Scale

Appeals to individual self-interest would be much more effective than sermons. If we could be led to believe that even small increases in carbon-dioxide emissions will shorten our own personal life expectancy, or make house values fall, or prevent our children from passing exams, we might take a more active interest. But self-interest will not be engaged unless the time-scale is short, say five or six years. We tend to get our idea of the middle-term and the long-term from the structure of the society we live in. Members of stable societies are better able to think in the long term². Technologically advanced nations are continually under-going rapid change and fragmentation from the effects of tele-communications. Consequently moderns are only aware of a short time span.

At a WBSI workshop in La Jolla in the 1980's the climatologist, Walter Orr Roberts, offered to explain to a group of American industrialists the predicted climate changes likely to affect their firms over the next 20 years³. Surely they would be interested in the emergence of a flood plain on their door-step? Or worried about the impending desertification of a nearby agricultural zone? To everyone's surprise, they were not interested. Politely they apologised, saying that the time-span of twenty years was too long. None of them could imagine what he would be doing in 20 years' time, or where he would be living. So a long and uncertain time-scale gives one more reason for the slow mobilisation of opinion in an urgent cause. There is no need to look in the far future. Even at this very moment bad things are happening to ocean fish and to birds. If we could be told that we will personally suffer from climate change in the next five years self-interest might spur commitment.

² I have discussed this in *The World of Goods*.

³ Western Behavioral Science Institute, La Jolla, directed by Richard Farson.

Other Scale Problems

Appeals for help to prevent some dire fate for the world population tend to fall on deaf ears. You might say that the scale of the »social unit« at risk is too big, or you might say the trouble is that there is no inclusive social unit. The problem of raising contributions for a collective good from members of a very large group is well-known (Olsen 1965). What we, the general public, are asked to do in order to reduce pollution is trivial compared with the alleged scale of the threat – it can't be serious. Each of us is asked to use less power in the home, to turn out the lights, recycle waste, use public transport, avoid air travel, and so on. As there will be no benefit unless millions of people do it, rational self-interest would take a free-ride on the contribution of the others – »My contribution won't make any difference«.

I have named four reasons why the danger to the environment poses questions awkward enough to put off any would-be-global leaders. Suspicion of bias confuses alignments, moralizing is counter-productive, the wrong time-scale diminishes public commitment, and so does wrong group-size. Given these negative factors, great leadership is an unattainable dream for the present environmental problems. Let us not grieve for what we cannot have.

Can world-wide solidarity be achieved without a world leader? Perhaps before that we should ask whether lack of solidarity really imperils a global pro-environment movement. At first it seems obvious that it does. Political scientists and philosophers often deplore the loss of communitarian values. Russell Hardin's book, *One for All* (Hardin 1995), is an antidote to romantic yearnings for solidarity. He emphasizes the dark side of living in a community. Once formed, a group exerts great power over the members, and demands conformity on pain of exclusion. Some unintended side-effects of group formation include violence against deviants, and sometimes brutal extermination of minorities. The solidary group is likely to provoke conflict with neighbouring groups. He illustrates the argument with the recent history of Yugoslavia and the civil wars of Serbia and Croatia. The costs of war in terms of destruction, pain and sorrow, are appalling. For our topic, the outbreak of war is the worst kind of disaster for the climate.

Hardin's warning is enough to stop anyone thinking that solidarity on a world scale will promote care for the environment. To imagine a »solidarity« that unites different nations and divergent creeds is an even more starry-eyed dream than hoping for a world leader. It is the concentration of power and solidarity that is dangerous.

Surely it is possible to imagine a form of solidarity that does not concentrate power in the hands of a leader? Or would that be another romantic dream? What about a solidarity that emerges from the combined interests of individuals who want to achieve some coordination? Hardin supposes that this is bound to create power

and unified control. I will offer a counter example from African research which shows how following self-interest can create solidarity without endowing any member of a group with power. To prepare the ground for this, we need to go back to basic questions of methodology.

Repleteness as a Method

It is not the fault of modern science that we pick up the age-old polarising habit. At different times we have thought of Nature, »red in tooth and claw«, as the aggressor against society, but at present it is the other way round. Society is seen as the aggressor against Nature, the victim. I would like to find a method of thinking about these problems that does not pit one term against the other, but treats Nature and Society as parts of one unit. Such a method might take a lot of political sensitivity and moral heat out of the problem.

Writing in aesthetic philosophy, the late Nelson Goodman applied the idea of rightness or fittingness to the internal relation between the features of the art object. A poem or painting has rightness, or is »replete«, when all the elements fit and contribute to the whole. Do the different elements of a painting support each other? Or do they jostle, jar, or intrude? We ask the same of literature, do the elements of this story fit together? We recognize what he has named »repleteness« when we see it, in a face, in a building, a picture or sculpture. Repleteness is a purely formal aspect of a work of art. It implies nothing about its content. When everything is linked together in a mutually enhancing way, the dense coherence of the work of art inspires respect, even awe. Goodman taught that this is how we recognize something as a work of art. The idea that I propose to adapt to thinking about humankind in its environment is to study them as interacting elements of one thing. We may be able to ask new questions about our topic.

But look out! We must not conclude that it is an inherent part of our nature to love coherence, symmetry and exhaustively ordered connectedness. Alas, no! The evidence does not support any such claim. We love other qualities as well. Remember our history and take account of bouts of enthusiasm for the excitement of revolt. Read about the exhilaration of revolution and the stimulus of periods of confusion.

Society and Nature

To return to our topic in hand – we had got to a point at which objectivity seemed unobtainable. We looked for another kind of approach to lay the spectre of hidden bias that besets all the arguments we know. Never mind about the view from nowhere. Our own familiar culture is the only honest stand-point we can use. Combining it with Goodman's theory of the ›replete‹ we can try to have a different conversation about what is going on.

In the context of our topic, ›Replete‹ suggests a people and their environment co-existing in harmony. This suggests the discourse of the ecologists who examine particular ecological zones. They observe the competition for survival between the different plant species; over time they note the success of some in dominating the others in a particular ecological zone; the climax arrives when the hegemony of some species and the minor status of the other species reach equilibrium. Sometimes (not always) each element seems to be contributing to the well-being of the others. The scientist's work is to assess the balance of mutual dependence.

So far from endorsing our romantic philosophers' ideal, we are looking at a well-trying method of identifying and comparing biological systems. We are not going to compare values or emotions, we will only study relations, interactions and exchanges. It is surely a merit that we have come back to the practice of scientists. We find we can reach some degree of objectivity because we have eschewed the comparison of values. All we have to do is trace the internal relations of the parts. Biologists do it all the time, and other scientists too. An entirely pragmatic exercise of measuring and counting may avoid the pitfalls of objectivity that entrap the humanists. The skill will lie in choosing parts whose relations can fit or not fit together.

Before proceeding I need to note a difficulty. It is easy to think of examples of wrong relations between nature and society. Our context is that our relation to nature is wrong. We know that we are destroying our own climate, and that nature will respond by destroying our society. But climate is an ambiguous example for this exercise. How can a human society enhance its own climate? The present context is a case of wreaking destruction and then deciding to do something to stop the damage. This would count as an attempt to restore rightness in the relationship that has gone wrong. It is an exceptional case, and in the examples that follow I will not suppose that a people can do anything to enhance their climate.

Pygmies in the Equatorial Forest

Repletion is about mutual enhancement of different elements. As an Africanist I try to suggest some African societies engaged in the mutual enhancement of their environment and society. It is instructive to start with mentioning the pygmies living in the equatorial forests of the Congo region. As far as I can see, their case does not fit the problem.

They live entirely by hunting wild game and gathering plants. The several charming ethnographies of pygmy life never suggest that there is any danger of their killing off the game animals or using up the vegetable life, spoiling the water, or damaging the trees by building shelters. They are too few in number, their level of technology is too simple. The forest provides everything for their way of life. They do it no harm. But, as far as I can see, they do nothing to enhance the life of the forest around them. This would be the case for many peoples living in extreme environments. They don't qualify for this exercise because the scale of their interactions is too small for them either to enhance or harm the forest on which they depend utterly.

The Lele people, whom I studied half a century ago (Douglas 1952), might count as having achieved environmental repletion, though it was precarious. They lived in little villages in the Kasai region of the (then) Belgian Congo, at an overall density of about 4 to the square mile. Take note that authority was very weak, practically absent, in Lele social life. An elder brother had some authority over his younger brother, a mother's brother over his nephew but, apart from close kinship, no one had any power to command. The village (averaging 200 people) was the significant social unit.

The village appointed a nominal chief or head man, but they defined his office so that no power whatever resided in it. He had to perform some rituals, and his only qualification for the office was to have outlived his peers, he had to be the oldest old man in the village. He was *ex officio* too old and too dodderly to give orders of any kind. Though the villages were so small, it was extremely difficult for them to raise support for any communal task. Groups of such villages recognized common origins in the name of which they could request armed help if under attack. Such units had no headman or chief. How did they manage to live together with considerable solidarity and without leadership or power?

As Russell Hardin would have us expect, anyone who offended the community was threatened with expulsion. What organisation they achieved was thanks to skilful balancing of interests. Both men and women worked in the fields to plant maize and manioc, bananas, palms and peppers in forest clearings. They used shifting cultivation with slash-and-burn techniques. In the savannah bush around the villages they grew pineapples, beans and groundnuts. In addition, the women fished

and reared poultry; the men drew palm-wine, wove cloth with raffia threads, sewed raffia garments, and hunted wild game.

Slash-and-burn is notoriously bad for the land if it is practiced over a large area. The branches of trees are burnt to provide space for planting and wood ash for fertilizer. The damage in the Lele case was limited by the wet climate which allowed the cut trees to regenerate quickly. Lele fields were very small. It was very hard work to climb up and lop off big branches. The iron they themselves dug and smelted was soft, their axes were small and blunt. Chopping off the branches with these axes was painfully laborious and of course they never could have cut down the trunks. I count their inefficient tools as an unintended handicap for the farmers and an advantage for the trees. The branches were left to dry out on the ground before the firing. After the harvest the fields were left fallow for a few years for new branches to grow before they were cut and fired again.

Partly by accident, partly by intention, the process was less destructive than it might have been. I can say this by imagining another people than the Lele settling here and causing more damage. The Lele farmers hated the work of cutting and clearing, they put it off as long as possible. It had to be complete before the onset of the rainy season, or nothing would burn at all. It follows that the heavy work had to be done in the short period of unrelieved heat and dryness. Choosing the date of firing depended on consensus, first on the probable time of the wet season, and second on negotiating village-wide agreement.

Firing too soon near the end of the dry season was dangerous lest the blaze went out of control and set the whole forest on fire. Firing too late meant that rains had started and the vegetation would be too wet to burn at all. The annual gamble with the climate demanded solidarity.

Once the outside fields had been cleared the empty space made a kind of fire-break. They knew that smoke going up could seed the clouds and release the pent-up rain. If the rain came before the fields were ready, there would be a very poor harvest. To prevent such a disaster they made a rule against any farmer firing his fields before everyone in the village was ready. Any one who broke the rule would be penalised. This was to prevent fire spreading from one prepared field to the unprepared fields and right through the forest. The farmer who got badly behind schedule took another risk: his fellow villagers, fearing that the dry season would be over before he was ready, might decide to disregard him and go ahead with the firing. His plot would be burnt before he had cleared it, and the rising smoke would make the rain fall, which would ruin his farming year, though everyone else would be well served.

Synchronizing the rain and the fire and managing the forest would be impossible without being able to manage the village. They would never have been able to do the farming if they had not invested a lot of energy in producing solidarity. I

offer this as an example of repletion. The society depended on the forest, they took a lot out of it, but they took trouble to protect it. This they were only able to do because reciprocally the forest not only provided meat and raw materials, it provided the society with the incentive to collaborate.

The Communal Hunt

The harmony of their community was always present as an ideal. Lele religion focused on peace within the village. For example, they claimed that spirits living in the forest would be angered by quarrelling in the village, and would hide away the animals, or deflect the arrows. Failure of the communal hunt was directly caused by fighting the day before.

At dawn, when it was still barely light, 12 to 30 hunters would assemble in the centre of the village. They talked and agreed on a likely area for finding game. Before they set off, they performed a little peace-making rite: each man took his knife out of his belt and exchanged it with that of another member of the hunt. Though the headman of the village was too old to hunt, he had to come and give his blessing. If there was a man or a woman who had displayed anger in the few days preceding, this was the time to come out and publicly bless the hunt. If an offended person neglected to declare forgiveness all round, he or she could be blamed afterwards for failures in the hunt. When the ceremonial precautions had been taken, the majority of the hunters would go to surround the chosen place and wait at their posts while a few would take the dogs in and drive the herds of wild pig or antelopes on to the hunters' arrows.

The communal hunt was not always effective in providing meat. Only too often the tired huntsmen came home empty-handed, or with only one small antelope for a whole day's work, nowhere near enough to share between 100 or 200 people. The Lele did not use poisoned arrows like their neighbours, the Nkutu, or nets, like the Mbuti. They had no money to buy guns like the Chokwe. Hunting with nets could be effective with only a few men. Poisoned arrows were good for the solitary hunter. The Lele knew about these methods, but I surmise that the more effective techniques were incompatible with their most cherished institution. The communal hunt, with dogs and bows and arrows, involved collaboration of all the active men, young and old.

A successful hunt they celebrated in the evening with dancing. After an unsuccessful hunt informal de-briefings brought into the open the quarrels deemed to have caused its failure. Its very chanciness enhanced their solidarity. The mere prospect of the hunt called forth reconciliations and expressions of mutual good

will. This may serve as another Lele example of repleteness. The life of the forest animals was enhanced by the accepted inefficiency of the hunt. The village benefited by enhanced solidarity which enabled them to synchronise the firing of their fields.

Remark that this effort to trace ›repleteness‹ between society and nature has treated them as one. Indeed, the enquiry assumes that they are parts of a composite thing. The Lele village would not be intelligible without taking the forest into account. It would not even be able to function. If a different people were living there, with different hunting techniques, the forest might be hunted out, or burnt out. With less solidarity the human society would not have succeeded in co-ordinating the agricultural work, the forest could be burnt down or the people might have starved. Here Society and Nature are bound up inextricably, they are really one. And we have an example of solidarity that does not give rise to centralised power.

I hope (and expect) to be criticised by Central Africanists for several aspects of this analysis. Hunting and cultivation were the most conspicuous interactions with Nature. If I had picked on other processes, I might have got different results. Many other aspects of their lives could be assessed in this way, item by item. Some would come out positively, clearly marked up for repleteness. For example, the Lele planted palm trees in the forest and tended them. They also observed punctiliously their instituted day of rest, every third day. The short two-day working week ought to be counted as a relief for the forest. Some other aspects would be negative: for example, abuse of animals, neglect of their poultry. Failure to collaborate with other villages, or their mistrust of outsiders, or the lack of authority vested in the Nyimi, their Chief, might be subjected to this treatment, and count negatively against repletion. To do the job properly would need more historical background, and comparative material from neighbouring peoples. For example, the Bushong, with a much more organized social system, managed a more prosperous agriculture.

Conclusion

It will strike you that the cases I have mentioned, Pygmy and Lele, are too rural and too exotic to compare with modern industrial society. It will be a pity if, after all this trouble to find a mode of enquiry that escapes the pitfalls of objectivity, it can only be applied to very small communities. However, that conclusion would be false because we have seen that scale factors cannot be ignored in the discussion of solidarity.

In other branches of the Social Sciences we do analyse smaller, more definable units. Something very similar is practiced in Business Schools. To draw the parallels

some simple substitutions are in order. For the Lele village, substitute a modern company; for the Lele attempts to control members of the village, substitute the Management; for the Lele forest, by turns compliant and mysteriously wayward, substitute the Work-force; for the Lele concern for solidarity, substitute the Management's concern for ›commitment‹. The Management quantifies its success rate by output and sales, the Lele village quantifies its success rate by the amount of meat brought in. The count for repleteness would work as well for either case. Likewise it would be possible to select a small section of a modern city for a parallel study of human relations with the local environment.

For our dealings with our climate, we might be able to adapt the way they use individual self-interest to get conformity in the timing of the fires. I don't see how we could copy the extent to which Lele solidarity depends on the theory that forest spirits monitor their behaviour and apply sanctions through the communal hunt. It would be like asking our scientists to discover a force that punishes our infractions of the climate protection rules by reducing the success of our national football teams.

At least ›replete‹ offers a way of studying our own interactions with others. It can evade local bias. It does not force us into allegiance with one or other of the major ideological conflicts of our own day. The more easily the interaction is conceived in terms of parts of a single unit, the more do the interesting questions emerge, and the stronger the hope of avoiding the pitfalls of objectivity.

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